

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
CONCERNING
THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS'
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM**

MARCH 9, 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Secretary Principi forms the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Task Force

- Task Force releases report making recommendations in March 2004
- Focus of VR&E needs to be employment, not education and training
- Most important recommendation is the Five-Track Employment Process

PVA recognizes the need for contract services to provide VR&E services

- Due to the fact that VR&E is limited in resources and staff, it is often forced to contract vocational rehabilitation services to private and state level entities
- If veterans live in areas where VR&E has no representative, they must rely on contract services
- However, PVA believes that the VA is ultimately the best provider of services
- Still have concerns about contract services
 - We believe that contract services are often more expensive than services provided directly by the VA
 - We also do not think that contractors necessarily have the best interest of the veteran in mind

Concerns of PVA

- Often severely disabled veterans needing DTAP services fall through the cracks
- Constraints on availability of Independent Living services
 - The VA should not be constrained from providing services by an arbitrary cap on new cases or a limited amount of time to provide services

Spinal Cord Injury - Vocational Integration Program (SCI-VIP)

- A new five-year research project that will attempt to greatly improve the employment rate of veterans with spinal cord injury.
- It will be conducted at four spinal cord injury/dysfunction (SCI/D) centers – Dallas, Milwaukee, San Diego and Cleveland - with control groups at the Houston SCI/D center and at the Hines SCI/D center in Chicago.
- The project will inject vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) directly into the medical rehabilitation process to provide “hands-on” vocational assistance throughout rehabilitation.

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, members of the Subcommittee, Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record on the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment program (VR&E). In response to criticisms about the VR&E program, the former Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi, formed the VR&E Task Force to conduct an “. . . unvarnished top to bottom independent examination, evaluation, and analysis.” The Secretary asked the Task Force to recommend “effective, efficient, up-to-date methods, materials, metrics, tools, technology, and partnerships to provide disabled veterans the opportunities and services they need” to obtain employment. In March 2004, the Task Force released its report recommending needed changes to the VR&E program.

PVA is an organization of veterans who are catastrophically disabled by spinal cord injury or disease. Our members rely on the services provided by the VR&E program. The Independent Living program administered by the VR&E service is especially important to our members who must learn to perform daily living activities in the process of rehabilitating to obtain employment.

PVA supported the recommendations made by the VR&E Task Force. In fact, our current Deputy Executive Director was a member of the Task Force. The Task Force recommended a fundamental change in how VR&E services are provided and the structures necessary to provide them. The report emphasized that VR&E needed to focus more on actually achieving employment for a veteran and not just on education and

training. Perhaps the most important change recommended by the Task Force was the development of the Five-Track Employment Process. The process would allow a veteran participating in the VR&E program to choose one of the following services:

- Re-employment with their previous employer.
- Rapid access to employment services with new employers.
- Self-employment.
- Long-term vocational rehabilitation services including education.
- Independent living services with the possibility of employment.

Because many of the recommendations of the Task Force report focused on the internal workings of VR&E and on cultural changes in the service, it is difficult to judge how well the program has implemented other recommendations.

We do recognize the importance of contract services to the function of VR&E. Due to the fact that VR&E is limited in resources and staff, it is often forced to contract vocational rehabilitation services to private and state level entities. If veterans live in areas where VR&E has no representative, they also must rely on contract services. We accept that this is necessary to ensure that veterans have the best opportunity to achieve meaningful employment.

However, we would like to emphasize one concern that we consistently maintain when dealing with contract services of any kind. PVA believes that the VA is ultimately the best provider of services to veterans. We also believe that contract services are often more expensive than services provided directly by the VA. We also do not think that contractors

necessarily have the best interest of the veteran in mind. We urge Congress to make available adequate resources so that the VR&E services can be provided by the VA directly to all veterans seeking help.

PVA remains concerned that many of our members may not have had access to the new information being put out by VA. Often, severely disabled veterans needing Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) services fall through the cracks, especially spinal cord injured veterans who may already be getting health care and rehabilitation from a VA spinal cord injury center despite still being on active duty. Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process; thus, they do not become aware of the VR&E services available to them.

PVA does have a couple of concerns with the Independent Living program. Currently, there is a cap—approximately 2,500—placed on the number of new Independent Living cases that the VA may take in each year. Likewise, Independent Living services can only be provided for a maximum of 30 months. We fully support the recommendation of the VR&E Task Force which calls for a study of the program to determine future demand and the types of services that may be needed. PVA believes that the ever-growing number of seriously disabled veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan could result in a significant demand for Independent Living services. The VA should not be constrained from providing services by an arbitrary cap on new cases or a limited amount of time to

provide services. Many of the newly injured veterans have complex disabilities that will require long-term management and care, to include Independent Living services.

One particular program that is currently taking place that we believe will be highly successful is the Spinal Cord Injury—Vocational Integration Program (SCI-VIP). This is a new five-year research project that will attempt to greatly improve the employment rate of veterans with spinal cord injury. It will be conducted at four spinal cord injury/dysfunction (SCI/D) centers—Dallas, Milwaukee, San Diego and Cleveland—with control groups at the Houston SCI/D center and at the Hines SCI/D center in Chicago. In short, the project will inject vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRC) directly into the medical rehabilitation process to provide “hands-on” vocational assistance throughout rehabilitation. The VRCs will make employment a priority component of the rehabilitation process.

PVA has strongly supported this concept since it was first proposed by Dr. Lisa Ottomanelli at the Dallas SCI Center. We hope that the VA will expand this program to benefit spinal cord injured veterans across the country. We would also urge Congress to make available additional funds within the research program to support this project.

In closing, PVA believes that it is vital that the VR&E program maintains a close partnership with the Department of Labor’s (DOL) Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). It is essential that the VA be involved in the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and DTAP administered by VETS. The DTAP program allows disabled

veterans to get early exposure to the VR&E services for which they are eligible. For this reason, we recommend, in accordance with *The Independent Budget*, that the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) assign primary responsibility for the planning and administration of VA's responsibilities in the DTAP program to the VR&E service and designate a DTAP manager. Currently, the DTAP program is not consistently administered throughout the county. It is essential that VETS and VA work this problem out so that disabled veterans get access to the vocational rehabilitation services to which they are entitled.

We support the recommendation made by the Task Force which calls for a Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment Working Group led by VA and composed of representatives of the Veterans Health Administration, VBA, VR&E, DOL-VETS, Department of Defense, and State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. This partnership will facilitate better employment services provided across a broader spectrum for veterans. This would be especially true if a closer relationship between the Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and VR&E staff existed.

We strongly urge the VA to continue to move forward on the recommendations made by the VR&E Task Force. PVA looks forward to working with this Subcommittee to ensure that the VA pursues meaningful reforms to the VR&E service.

We would like to thank you again for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record. We would be happy to answer any questions that you might have. Thank you.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2005

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$228,000 (estimated).

Paralyzed Veterans of America Outdoor Recreation Heritage Fund – Department of Defense -- \$1,000,000.

Fiscal Year 2004

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$228,000 (estimated).

Fiscal Year 2003

Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, administered by the Legal Services Corporation — National Veterans Legal Services Program— \$228,803.